

## Stay With Me Stay by LectersLambs

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**Summary:** Before they were venturing into the Upside Down and fighting interdimensional monsters, Joyce Byers and Jim Hopper were just two teenagers trying to get through their senior year of Hawkins High. And despite everything that has happened, Joyce and Hopper just can't seem to stop thinking about the events that transpired between them prior to the disappearance of Will Byers.

# 1. The Reappearance of Joyce Donnelly

I finally finished season 2 and I can't get enough of these two. I know I shipped them in Season 1 but this season was EVERYTHING. So here's my take on what happened between Joyce and Hopper in high school and the history they share. This story will be split into two parts, with the first half looking at Joyce and Hopper's relationship through high school eventually leading up to the second half which will take place after Season 2.

The story title is taken from the Stevie Nicks song 'Leather and Lace', my personal Jopper anthem.

Hope you enjoy the first chapter!

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## Chapter 1 – The Reappearance of Joyce Donnelly

On the last day of summer vacation in 1961, Jim Hopper was watching his friend Benny Hammond clean up his bloody nose for what Hopper hoped would be the last time for at least a couple of weeks. They were sitting by the lake, deep in the heart of the forest, a common spot for the teens of Hawkins High to drink their parents stolen liquor where the police and responsible adults were too far away to hear or disturb them. Over the course of that summer, Benny and Hopper had regularly visited there during the day where Hopper would indulge in his new found habit of smoking. It had also become their unofficial retreat from when either of them would get in a fist fight which incidentally happened more than the pair would've liked.

This time round it had been Lonnie Byers to burst Benny's nose. As Hopper looked at his friend, an absolute beast of a boy, with a large build with a big, long head, it was easy to see why the coaches at their high school had practically begged him to join the wrestling team. It was to their dismay, however, to find that Benny was nothing but a gentle giant who was too concerned that he had hurt his opponent to actually learn how to successfully wrestle someone. But one thing that eclipsed his hatred for violence was his loyalty to his friend. And unfortunately for Benny, Hopper more than often

found himself on the receiving end of a right hook causing Benny to almost constantly intervene to defend him.

Lonnie had been upset that Hopper was now seeing Chrissy Carpenter, an ex of Byers and had decided to round up his gang of greaser assholes to ambush Hopper and Benny on their way home from their shift at Hopper's father's auto shop. Lonnie had only gotten one punch in when Benny tackled Byers to the ground, only for the boy to run away at the mere sight of a police officer across the street.

And now Benny was hissing as he pinched the bridge of his still bleeding nose and Hopper couldn't help but feel guilty. To help with the guilt, Hopper reached into the inside pocket of his brown leather jacket and fished out his pack of Camels, popping one into this mouth and lighting it with his trusted Zippo.

"Don't worry about Lonnie, man, he won't be on your ass for too long," Benny said, surprising him Hopper, considering he was the one nursing his wound yet comforting reassuring Hopper.

"Oh really?" Hopper half laughed as he took a drag of his cigarette and exhaled a concentrated cloud of smoke. "And what makes you say that?"

Benny pulled the tissue from his nose and inspected it, satisfied to see the amount of blood gushing from his nose was now calming down. "Jonathan Donnelly was in Dad's diner this morning. I overheard him say that Joyce arrived back last night and that she starts school tomorrow."

Jim Hopper felt his heart stop beating as the words left Benny's mouth. Joyce, his childhood crush of almost fourteen years, was back. A year ago, her mother had died and Joyce... well Joyce hadn't taken it well. At sixteen years of age, Joyce had suffered her first mental breakdown and her father had thought it best she go stay with her Aunt Darlene in Chicago. The last time Jim had seen Joyce was when he'd gone round to her house to say goodbye, and maybe even finally tell her how he felt about her. But when he'd seen the tears in those beautiful big brown eyes, he'd thought it best he didn't say anything. Instead he'd given her a quick embrace, promised to write and watched her father drive her away.

But of course, a lot changed in a year, and Hopper had neglected his promise to keep in contact. He'd started working at his father's autoshop, was dating one of the most popular girls at Hawkins high, had been dating even more girls before that, had his rivalries with Lonnie Byers, Ted Wheeler and Dick Holland, and Joyce just seemed to slip away from his priorities. That wasn't to say, however, that he didn't think about her. Whenever a happy yet melancholy song came on the radio, whenever a thunder storm ripped through Hawkins or whenever a pretty brunette girl tucked her hair behind her ear similar to the way she had when she was nervous, he'd think of her then. But when the thoughts of her came, so did the guilt and sadness and longing and he didn't like those feelings one bit.

"Our school?" was the most intelligent response Hopper could think of when posed with such information.

Benny chuckled knowingly. "Yeah well no shit, Jim, of course she's going to our school. Jonny Byers doesn't have two dimes to rub together, never mind the cash to send her to some prep school."

"I was just asking," Jim irritably snapped back causing the amused grin on Benny's face to only grow.

"Just asking what?" a girl's voice came from behind Hopper, causing him to whip his head round. As if on cue, here came Chrissy Carpenter to remind him just how truly life had changed for him since the last time Joyce was in Hawkins. Chrissy was a pretty girl there was no denying that, with her shoulder length, perfectly curled blonde hair and flattering pink poodle skirt that always looked like she was getting her first wear out of it. But with pretty came a mean streak, one of the main reasons Hopper had liked her. She was intimidating and smart, with a smile so sweet but a tongue capable of spitting venom.

When she arrived at the two boys, Hopper reached up with his neck as she bent down to give him a welcoming kiss before sitting herself in his lap. She scrunched her nose up at Hopper's cigarette and delicately took it out of his mouth before stubbing it out on the rock beneath him without a word, instead smiling at him with those perfect white pearls. He hated when she did that but hey, he liked screwing her so he was willing to put up with it. She turned around

to Benny as if to silently ask him what they were talking about, not once taking the time to remark on Benny's bloody nose.

"Joyce Donnelly is back in town," Benny sounded bored already when he spoke. Benny did not like Chrissy.

Especially when Chrissy let out one of her spine tingling mean girl giggles she used whenever she was laughing *at* someone. "Jesus Christ, *that* wacko?! Didn't she go totally nuts one day in the middle of homeroom and destroyed Mrs Hemp's classroom?"

Benny and Hopper didn't answer. Once upon a time the three had been friends, and while they had drifted from Joyce they still felt a twinge of awkwardness and guilt whenever someone mocked her, never joining in on the banter. It was true what Chrissy had said, Hopper had witnessed it first-hand. One minute Joyce was staring at her desk, shaking ever so slightly but barely moving or breathing. The next she was hysterically crying and screaming, flipping her desk over and throwing whatever she could throw all over the place. Hopper had gone to calm her down only to have Mr Thomson, the gym teacher, drag him away as the school nurse subdued her. It had been eight days after her mother's death, and while decent people like Benny and Hopper, hell, even Lonnie Byers, understood. To others, the episode had gained her a reputation of 'crazy'.

"Jeez, it sure is gonna be one interesting senior year with that nutcase back," Chrissy sniggered harshly.

Hopper only half agreed with her. It really was going to be an interesting year.

The next morning in the school parking lot, Hopper was unexpectedly nervous, tapping his fingers in quick time against the steering wheel. He had just finished his cigarette and found himself flicking it out his window only to reach into his pack and pull out another, lighting it robotically as his eyes scanned the people and cars in front of him. Benny remarked with disgust as he began chain smoking but Hopper paid him no attention as he continued to stare out at the crowd, looking for the familiar face.

Benny could only smirk to himself as he watched the nervous wreck

that was his friend. He knew fine well who Hopper was anxious to see, and when his eyes widened every time he saw the back of a brunette girl's head step out of a car Benny had to stop himself from laughing. Jim Hopper could convince everyone he was a quiet, angry, badass with one hell of a right hook but he couldn't fool Benny. Benny was reminded of when they were in middle school at the Winter Snow Ball, the way Jim's eyes were pinned to the front door of the dance hall waiting for Joyce Donnelly to make her grand entrance. Of course back then, as excited as Jim had been to see her, he had never plucked up the courage to ask her dance and she'd ended up slow dancing to Sam Cooke with Lonnie Byers.

Benny doubted even now that he would pluck up the courage to tell Joyce how he felt, especially when he wouldn't even admit his feelings to himself. Checking his watch, Benny could see it was time to head in.

"Come on, man. She's obviously late or maybe I misheard Mr Donnelly, we gotta go to class," Benny nudged Hopper slightly to gesture to get him to leave the car but Hopper's eyes stayed glued to the front. He didn't answer and instead kept looking. Sighing to himself, Benny opened his door and got out only to run into Chrissy who'd caught sight of Hopper sitting waiting in his truck.

"Sweetie come on I'm right here!" Chrissy cooed into the rolled down window, snapping Jim out of his trance. Benny could have sworn he'd seen something similar to irritation flash in Hopper's eyes before he forced a smile as his girlfriend and stepped out of the car. Chrissy came round to meet him and Hopper kissed her with open eyes, not even looking at her. As she took his hand and led him toward the front door, Jim looked over his shoulder one more time but still failed to see that small brown eyed girl amongst the crowd and sighed with defeat as he let Chrissy lead the way.

It was during lunch that Hopper's hope began to dwindle. It was half way through the day and despite his best efforts, he hadn't caught a glimpse of her, not even someone who looked vaguely like her. Even now as he scanned the cafeteria picking at his ham sandwich, he couldn't see shit. He figured perhaps Benny had been right about being wrong and Hopper couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. True he had no idea what he would even have said to Joyce if he had

seen her. But even he couldn't deny the excitement he'd felt the night before at the idea of seeing her again, it had been surprising and exhilarating and terrifying all at once, and it was a feeling that Jim couldn't ignore.

But as he realised those feelings now appeared to be for nothing, they became a lot easier to ignore. Now all he felt was frustrated and emotionally drained. So what better distraction than to lightly kick Chrissy from under the table and gesture to the window. The pair got up from the table almost immediately and headed to the bleachers.

Under the bleachers was the unofficially designated spot for all couples to make out during classes. Despite the teachers best efforts to patrol the area, many of them just found it awkward and the area was mostly kept unmonitored. So naturally, Jim and Chrissy had utilised the spot more than a few times. And now they were under the bleachers, with Chrissy practically devouring his mouth with her own.

Hopper hadn't really been as into it as he had hoped, his mind still miles away on the day's disappointment but nevertheless he would keep kissing Chrissy until those feelings drifted away. She had him pinned up against the back of bleachers with her hands in his hair. He had his arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her close to him. When Jim slipped his tongue into her mouth and collided with her own, Chrissy's hands tightened on his hair and she moaned into his mouth. She moved her head to the left, inviting him to her neck and Jim followed suit, placing quick kisses down her throat and Chrissy sighed.

"Oh, Jimmy," she panted in his ear. That was another thing Hopper hated about Chrissy, when she called him 'Jimmy'. It made him feel like an inadequate kid, after all that's what his mother had called him up until he was thirteen when he less-than-politely asked her stopped. Jim figured he was too far along now to tell her to stop.

As his lips travelled back up again and met her lips, the pair were interrupted by the cough. Hopper knew cold season was well over and the cough wasn't meant as a symptom, but that of someone announcing their presence. Chrissy pulled away from Jim to give whoever had disturbed them a sneer but her face fell when she

looked at the cougher. Jim couldn't see from where he had been pinned and stepped forward to look at the person in question.

For the second time in twenty four hours, Jim Hopper felt his heart stop beating.

The girl that stood before him looked almost completely different to the last time he'd seen her. The girl was not dressed in a red and white checked shirtwaist dress, instead she was dressed in tight black trousers, cropped half way down her shin, biker boots, a black and white striped, long sleeve shirt and that hung just off her shoulders under a black, tasselled leather jacket. Her hair was no longer shoved up into a messy but sensible bun, but instead her naturally curled, thick brunette hair flowed free in a centre parting that stopped just two inches below her collar bone. And from her red painted lips, a freshly lit cigarette dangled.

Joyce Donnelly, the sweet young girl he'd known only a year ago, had transformed into what could only be described as the woman of Jim Hopper's dreams. And as he looked at her now, taking a drag of her cigarette, those beautiful brown orbs staring at him deeply, Hopper felt a stir in the pit of his stomach and took a deep breath to calm him.

"Joyce," Chrissy surprised tone brought Hopper back down to Earth, yet he continued to stare at Joyce in a trance. "I didn't know you were back in town..." Chrissy lied in an attempt to break the awkwardness.

"Just got back yesterday," Joyce exhaled a long line of smoke, Hopper's eyes infatuated with the small 'o' her mouth made. Her eyes didn't leave Hopper as she did so, sending a shiver down his spine.

"I see," Chrissy said and looked at Hopper, expecting him to say something. When he didn't, Chrissy slowly took his hand and began to pull him backwards, leading him away. "Well we'll see you around, nice to have you back," Chrissy's forced kindness did nothing for Joyce as she continued to stare at Hopper. She said nothing.

When Chrissy realised Hopper wouldn't budge, she let go of his hand and walked away herself, expecting him to follow. Instead he



lingered for a moment, taking in the sight of Joyce Donnelly, absolutely in awe of her. When she didn't say anything and the sound of Chrissy's footsteps began to fade, he started to walk away from her when she finally spoke.

"It's good to see you, Hop," Joyce simply said as she went to inhale from her cigarette again. Jim couldn't do anything but smirk, the sound of the name only Joyce called him, the name only Joyce was allowed to call him, was like music to his ears. It had been too long. She gave him a small knowing smile as Jim turned on his heel and walked away from her, smiling to himself.

It really was good to see her again.

## 2. Time Can Do So Much

I know I only posted yesterday but I'm going away this weekend so wasn't sure how much writing I'd get done so really wanted to get this chapter done and posted so apologies that it's not as long as I had hoped. Hope you enjoy this chapter, title is taken from 'Unchained Melody' by the Righteous Brothers cause hey you can't go wrong with a classic!

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### Chapter 2

That evening, Hopper was sitting in his room listening to 'Walk Don't Run' by the Ventures for what felt like the fifteenth time, trying to dull out the sound of his parents drunkenly slow dancing in the front room. Since his father had bought the auto shop, things had been a lot happier in the Hopper household. It felt like they'd been celebrating their success every night for the past year, most nights ending like they did tonight, his parents having one too many glasses of wine and gushing over each other. As damaging as it was to Hopper's 'image', he couldn't help but enjoy this peaceful serenity that had taken over their lives.

But Hopper would never forget what their lives had been before. He wouldn't forget the nights his father drank whiskey rather than wine. He wouldn't forget his father spitting at Jim how much of a disappointment he was. He wouldn't forget his father teaching him how to fight in one way or another. He wouldn't forget his mother crying herself to sleep most nights when she hadn't drank herself to the point of unconsciousness. He remembered all of it. And there was no amount of success or money or laughs that could erase it all from Jim's memory.

In the midst of the music and laughter, Hopper heard a soft knock on the front door of the house. It appeared his parents had heard it too, as the music ceased to play and the sound of his mother's kitten heels clicking against the wooden hallway leading to the front door could be heard from Jim's room. As curious as he was, Jim rolled over his bed and gently removed the needle from record player so he could listen to whoever it was that was at the door.

He couldn't make out his mother's words but she spoke in a high pitched excited voice that Jim rarely heard. His interest peaked and Jim made his way out of his bedroom door to go see who it was.

His heart leapt when he caught sight of Joyce standing in the doorway smiling kindly at his mother.

"Jim look who it is!" Mrs Hopper announced waving an arm at Joyce who gave a small smile wave.

"Hey, Hop," Joyce said quietly, almost nervously.

Jim didn't realise the rather large smile on his face until he started speaking. "Joyce, hey! Um," he found himself stuttering. "What—eh, what um, what're you doing here?" he put a hand round the back of his neck and rubbed it, suddenly very aware of his hands and unsure what to do with them.

"Joyce here came to see if you two wanted to go and catch up? Isn't that sweet?" Mrs Hopper beamed at Jim. His mother had always been fond of Joyce, their mothers had been friends in high school and his mother had gone round to her house every day with Jim after her mother died.

Jim's smile couldn't help but grow. "Yeah sure, I'll just grab my jacket," Jim gestured behind him like an idiot and practically ran to grab his jacket. While it was still summer, the nights still tended to get cold. He'd noticed Joyce was wearing practically the same outfit from earlier in the day except now she donned a grey sweater rather than the stripped top she had been wearing. As he took his coat from his room, he couldn't help but stop and fix his hair in the mirror before darting out.

When he came out, Joyce and Mrs Hopper were chatting pleasantly and quietly. When he stepped into Joyce's eye view her eyes shone up at him and she smiled. "Shall we?" she nodded to the door and Jim could only nod in return as he rushed out the house after Joyce, his mother shouting behind him to be back before eleven.

When they were far enough away from the house, Jim finally spoke.

"Hey, so umm, sorry about being weird earlier," he was rubbing his neck with nerves again. He stole a glance at Joyce, so tiny in height compared to him. She was staring straight ahead with a content expression on her face. "I just wasn't expecting to see you and let's be honest you look a lot dif-"

"Hop, it's fine don't sweat I totally get it," Joyce looked up at him with a reassuring smile and Hopper felt a rush of relief flow over him.

They were silent for a bit as they walked along the street. It wasn't quite dark yet, still relatively bright out but the street lamps were lit and the street deserted and quiet. It looked almost nice.

"So how have you been anyway? How was Chicago?" Jim asked a bit quicker and enthusiastically than he would of liked.

Joyce nodded, a small smile on her lips like she was amused with the way Jim anxiously had asked her. "Chicago was good. I really loved being in the city, a lot of cool people and music, but," she took a deep sigh as she looked around her and crossed her arms across her chest, shrugging. "There's just something about home, y'know?" she gave him a look like she expected an answer but didn't expect him to say anything. He nodded silently in agreement. "And what about you? I see your dad owns the auto shop now," she asked as though it was ten times more exciting than it actually was.

"Yeah, he's real proud of it," Jim nodded. He knew Joyce remembered how things had been in his family before she left, but he knew she didn't want to pry so she wouldn't say anything.

Instead she smiled, almost to herself. "I'm still kinda disappointed he didn't rename it as the 'auto hop'," she let out a small laugh.

Jim snorted at her awful joke and he nudged her playfully. "That was terrible and you know it," he chuckled.

Joyce let out a bigger laugh this time at the sound of Hopper's deep laugh. "Yeah it was pretty dreadful, I'll admit." As they walked along, Jim pulled out his pack of cigarettes and offered her one. With wide surprised eyes, Joyce accepted and watched in bewilderment as

Hopper took one for himself and placed it in his mouth. "Well Jim Hopper!" she proclaimed, completely aghast. "I didn't know you smoke!"

Jim smirked as he pulled out his lighter and sparked up his cigarette before passing the lighter to Joyce. "Well, what can I say, there's a lot you don't know about me now," he said, almost jokingly.

Joyce lit up and exhaled a small cloud of smoke. "Yeah, well who's fault is that now?"

Jim felt his throat tighten and his stomach churn, her accusation piercing him. "Joyce, I..."

"Relax Hop!" she laughed cheerfully. "I'm just busting your balls man!" she lightly punched his bicep and Jim looked at her, rather confused. As she walked in front of him and turned to face him, walking backwards Jim took a moment to see how much she'd really changed. This Joyce wasn't the same quiet, bookish, shy girl he'd known way back when. This Joyce seemed confident, playful and overall happier.

She grinned at him for a moment before reading his expression. "Jeez, what's up with you, when did you get so tense?" she raised her brows at him.

He smiled at that and shook his head. "It's nothing, it's just..." he trailed off for a second. "You seem different, Joyce," he told her honestly.

She looked away as if in thought before staring at the ground in front of her and shrugged. "Well, what can I say, a lot can happen in a year, Hop," she brushed it off casually.

"Yeah you're telling me," he raised his eyebrows in agreement before taking another draw of his cigarette.

She came back round to his side. "But not you, Hop. You haven't changed," he could hear the smile in her voice. "You're still the same old brooding hardass I once knew."

As they walked they came to the clearing by the lake. Joyce had been

here before and he caught her staring out at the water fondly. The pair used to swim there as kids in the summer. One day they'd made their own tire swing when they were twelve. It turned out to be rather terrible construction of their part and Jim had gone flying and broken his arm. After he'd finished screaming and crying to Joyce in pain, he'd made her promise not to tell people he'd cried. Joyce had agreed and kept his secret. God forbid people knew Jim Hopper had feelings.

Joyce perched herself on the rock by the lakeside where he and Benny had sat just the day before. She brought her knees up to her chin and Hopper sat down across from her, stretching his legs out in front of him. He slyly watched as Joyce looked ahead of her, a small, remembering smile playing on her lips when suddenly something came across her mind and she looked at Hopper, all wide eyed again.

"Although there is something about you that has changed," she observed taking a drag thoughtfully.

He raised a questioning brow at her. "Oh really? And what would that be?"

She snorted. "Since when did you start dating that total square, Chrissy Carpenter?!"

He had to laugh at that. Joyce and Jim, always the outcasts. "That is a pretty new development," he laughed, pulling his heels back and crossing his arms over his now elevated knees. "She's not as awful as you'd think," he said half-heartedly.

Joyce made an unconvinced scoff but Jim didn't dare defend himself. After a moment, Joyce appeared to have worked up the courage to ask her next question. "So is she your first then?" she looked up at him through long lashes.

"First what?"

"Don't be coy now, Hop," she almost groaned. He was really going to make her say it. "Your first *sexual partner*."

Jim smiled triumphantly as Joyce made a uncomfortable expression

as the words left her mouth. He raised his eyes then. "No actually," Jim admitted, almost sheepishly. "It was actually Brenda, then Susan, then Linda, and then Chrissy," he looked away, a small blush rising to his cheeks as he took a small drag of his cigarette before stubbing it out.

Joyce's jaw practically dropped to the floor and her eyes grew bigger. "Fuck, Hop," she sighed, shaking her head before amusingly smirking at him. "You've been busy," she gestured at him with her cigarette before she too discarded hers.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah.." Jim muttered, his eyes shining before turning his head back to Joyce. "What about you? You still gonna be having a white wedding?"

Joyce shook her head, embarrassed and stared at her hands. "No, actually," she said, instantly surprising Jim. "There was this guy in Chicago, we dated for a while but it didn't last long. But long enough, y'know."

Jim didn't expect the unfamiliar and unwanted feelings to wash over him but nevertheless they did. He felt anger, disappointment, envy... He cursed himself internally. Hopper felt jealous. Jealousy toward some random guy in Chicago he'd never met but now wanted to punch him for even touching Joyce.

*His Joyce.*

Hopper pushed the dangerous thought to the back of his head and quickly changed the subject.

"So you suppose this is you back in Hawkins then? For good then," he asked almost hopeful.

She smirked at him, her brown eyes sparkled at him in the arriving moonlight. "Careful, Jim, you almost sounded like you missed me for a second there," she gave him a mischievous look there that almost sent his heart flying out his chest.

*Get it together, Jim.*

"So what if I did, Joyce?" he shrugged nonchalantly before he smiled

at her. "I did miss you," he admitted, besides lying was something he never easily could do to her.

"But not enough to write to me..." Joyce said quietly, a hint of sadness in her tone that chipped away at his heart. "Why didn't you write me, Hop? I'm not mad, I just..." she trailed off again. "Why didn't you?"

Jim sighed, he'd known this was coming and he still wasn't sure if he could give her a straight answer. "Honestly," Jim began before sighing. "I don't really know. I wanted to write you but every time I sat down to, I just..." he looked away from her then, the expecting look in her eyes too much for him. "I wanted to tell you everything, everything that happened to me but... it just wouldn't have been the same. I just wanted to be talking to you, not writing," he looked back at her and saw her staring at her hands again. "It was selfish of me, I'm sorry."

She looked up at him then, he expected to see those same glassy eyes he'd seen whenever she was sad or upset but there was none. Instead she got up unexpectedly and sat down next to him and put her hand over his, gazing at him with kind eyes that made him catch his breath ever so quietly.

"Well," she shrugged again. "I'm here now," she turned her lips up into a calming smile. "So what's been going on?"

The pair sat like that for hours, smoking cigarettes and sharing stories of their year apart. Jim talked about the auto shop, his fights, him and Benny's regular shenanigans with teachers and such. Joyce talked about the wonders of the city, of the friends she'd made and her aunt Darlene introducing her to all kinds of new music. They could've sat there for even longer, laughing and catching up before Joyce let out a sleepy yawn and rested her head on his shoulder.

He stood up then and pulled her up by her hands, deciding the time was now to walk her home. They shared a cigarette en route and chatted a bit more before they reached Joyce's driveway on Old Cherry Road. As they said their goodbyes, Joyce stood up on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him close.



Jim had hesitated for a moment before wrapping his arms tightly around her. They had never been like this. There was something differently intimate about the way they were holding each other. For some reason, they held each other tighter than either of them had the day Joyce had left for Chicago. He turned his head and bent down to bury his nose in the nape of her neck, smelling her hair. She smelled of cigarettes and fruity shampoo and it instantly sent warmth through him, a warmth he could've sworn he'd never felt before. As they broke apart with Joyce pulling away, she murmured a 'goodnight, Hop' to him before heading inside.

As Jim walked home, kicking a stone along the way as he went, he thought to himself that a lot really *had* changed in a year. And when he got home and into his bed, he fell asleep smiling.